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Thinking through Cultural Diversity: Bridging Cultural Differences in Asian Traditions

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Thinking through Cultural Diversity: Bridging Cultural Differences in Asian Traditions, was a national project designed to foster faculty, curriculum and program development related to Asian cultures and societies at fifteen community colleges organized into five geographic clusters under the central guidance of the Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP)—a joint initiative of the East-West Center and the University of Hawai‘i. A primary objective of the project was to foster cultural literacy about Asia through faculty-, program- and curriculum-development. The project was organized around collaborative explorations of how Asian cultures and societies have conceived and practically engaged issues of cultural difference, with particular emphasis on the historical dynamics of cultural interaction in China and Southeast Asia; how the arts, literature, knowledge systems, religious traditions and trade serve as cultural bridges; how different conceptions of personhood and community afford distinctive resources for framing and engaging issues of cultural plurality; and how Asian perspectives on cultural difference might complement those that are prevalent in American undergraduate classrooms.

For the project, ASDP worked with five community colleges across the U.S., each representing a distinctive constituency in American higher education. Middlesex Community College (MCC) in Lowell, MA serves a mixed urban and suburban student body in a community that was once a major hub of the textile industry and now home to the second largest community of Cambodian immigrants in the country. The Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) in Philadelphia, PA serves a particularly diverse urban student body, as does the City College of San Francisco (CCSF). Johnson County Community College (JCCC) in Overland Park, KS serves a primarily suburban student body in one of the wealthier counties in the country, while the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) in Catonsville, MD serves both inner city and suburban student bodies on its two campuses. Four of these schools are ASDP “regional centers” with extensive experience in organizing Asian studies faculty development programs and lecture series, as well as Asia-related community outreach. The five schools range in student population from 11,000 (MCC) to over 100,000 (CCBC).

Each of the five schools identified two partner community colleges with whom to work over the three years of the project. MCC partnered with Quinsigamond Community College (Worcester, MA) and Bristol Community College (New Bedford, MA); CCP partnered with Camden County College (Camden, NJ) and Harrisburg Area Community College (Harrisburg, PA); JCCC partnered with Dodge City Community College (Dodge City, KS) and Butler Community College (Eldorado, KS); CCSF partnered with Mission College (Santa Clara, CA) and Alameda Community College (Alameda, CA); and CCBC partnered with Howard Community College (Columbia, MD) and Frederick Community College (Frederick, MD). In total, forty-five teachers and administrators from these fifteen community colleges participated in the project.

The project featured a progressive series of activities that integrated faculty, curriculum and institutional development; stimulated and supported relevant research; and encouraged increased public outreach on project themes. These activities included: a 10-day summer symposium that introduced intellectual resources for engaging project themes and introductions to the cultural traditions of China and Southeast Asia; a distinguished lecture series at each community college cluster; mentoring visits to each cluster by Asian studies scholars; 3-day faculty and curriculum development workshops at each cluster; a 5-day online conference that featured project-related research from twenty-four of the project participants; and a two-day “lessons learned”

conference for representatives from each participating school. All of these planned activities were completed on schedule. The project resulted in thirty new courses or substantial curriculum modules, two dozen research papers (five slated for publication in the peer-reviewed journal, *East-West Connections*), new Asia-related program development, significant new relations with the communities served by the schools involved in the project, and a set of classroom-ready videos on Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures and societies.

Project Reflection

Details of the project outcomes can be found in the interim reports, with an extensive summary in the January 2015 report. Here, it is perhaps useful to reflect more broadly on the ASDP Bridging Cultures project and draw some lessons for future capacity- and program-building efforts at the community college level.

Like the other projects that were funded in the launch year of the Bridging Cultures at Community Colleges initiative, the ASDP project on Cultural Diversity in Asia was ambitious in both scope and aim. The project design drew on over twenty years of experience conducting faculty-, curriculum- and institutional-development programs for undergraduate educators, and proved to be generally effective. A guiding principle, based on ASDP experience, was that in working with community colleges, collaborative design and implementation is essential. Across the US, a fair generalization is that community colleges have a culture of shared or collective governance, and that the success of projects like those funded by the Bridging Cultures initiative will depend on how well both administrative and faculty stakeholders are involved in crafting and conducting the project. In recognition of this, the ASDP project design was purposefully left underdetermined at the proposal stage and was fleshed out only as the project stakeholders at the fifteen colleges began working together as teams representing both their individual schools and the three-school cluster of which they were a part.

The Summer Symposium that launched the project was successful in laying out theoretical and methodological concepts related to “bridging cultures” and for introducing content on the cultural diversity of China and Southeast Asia. But, just as importantly, it provided an occasion for faculty and administrators in each cluster to begin fleshing out visions for subsequent activities included in the project design: the Distinguished Lecture events, Mentor Visits, two-day Content Workshops and the Online Conference. This collaborative design approach worked as hoped, even in the instances—for the Pennsylvania/New Jersey and Maryland clusters—where stakeholder interests were divided between China and Southeast Asia, necessitating a somewhat different approach to the Workshop program design and implementation than at other clusters where a single geographic/cultural focus prevailed.

In retrospect, however, it’s possible to see that the overall design, which included only one meeting at which all the project participants were present in person together (the Summer Symposium), did not address some of the realities of maintaining project buy-in among all of the participants, including the demands of committee work and teaching five or more courses at a time than together can demand fifty hours of work per week. The benefits of spending a concentrated period of time away from normal work and family duties to work on common projects are inordinately great among community college faculty. A second gathering of all

project participants, midway through the project would likely have yielded greater impacts than the five two-day workshops hosted at each of the clusters. As one participant phrased it, “getting away can mean getting more.” Providing participants with an opportunity to travel and meet collectively can have a multiplier effect on their efforts, imaginations and commitments.

A second lesson is that while peer-to-peer collaborations are essential, so are top-down commitments to and incentives for change that come with strong administrators support. Predictably, the design worked best at schools with the strongest administrative leadership and support for the project (notably, CCP and MCC), and in the clusters in which the partnership among the 3 schools was strongest, due in part but not exclusively to geographic proximity (notably, the Maryland and Pennsylvania/New Jersey clusters). Yet, while administrative oversight is crucial, so is administrative continuity. Negative impacts on project vitality related to administrative discontinuity occurred in both the Kansas cluster (loss of the lead school coordinator due to promotion and his replacement by someone new to the school) and the California cluster (marked administrative discontinuity in the partner schools of College of Alameda and Mission College, and college-wide governance challenges at the lead school, the City College of San Francisco).

While the continuity challenges experienced in the project were contingent on factors over which no control was possible, a project designed to allow all project participants to meet more than once could well have mitigated the impacts of unplanned discontinuity. This was certainly a message conveyed by representatives from the thirteen schools that participated in the final Lessons Learned Conference. Meeting annually or at least twice over the course of the 3-year project would not only have provided faculty participants with dedicated blocks of time to reflect on their own work in the project, but also to learn from and be energized by the curriculum development and research work being done by others. For administrators, even if new to the project due to personnel changes, being personally present at meetings where the accomplishments of other schools are being made evident is a powerful incentive for devoting increased resources to ensure the success of the project on their own campuses.

These concerns notwithstanding, the project did make manifestly evident how powerfully a multi-year investment can affect community college faculty, their students, and the wider communities that they serve. But they also made evident how the most lasting ramifications of such projects are not planned-for impacts, but rather emergent consequences of the contributions of everyone drawn into the project’s orbit. To give a single, striking example, at Middlesex Community College, located in Lowell, MS—as noted earlier, a one-time center of the textile industry and now home to the second largest concentration of Cambodian-Americans in the US (over 30,000)—two of the faculty involved in the project linked their curriculum-development and community outreach efforts. A turning point came when they invited a Cambodian master ceramicist, working as a stock clerk at the local Walmart, to conduct a demonstration in connection with the project Workshop. Local media coverage led to suggestions of building a traditional, wood-fired kiln to try to draw younger members of the Cambodian-American community into engagement with their cultural heritage. The US Parks Department office in Lowell entered the picture and donated park land for a kiln site; local business people contributed resources for the kiln construction; local primary and secondary schools became interested in having their students experience Cambodian ceramics traditions and practices,

which led to the master ceramicist being offered support to develop programs for students and community members. In turn, interest in ceramic arts blossomed on the MCC campus in such degree that the school has committed to offering its first ever studio art courses in ceramics.

A story like this says a great deal about how community colleges work, about the challenges and often unexpected benefits of “bridging” cultures, and about the meaning of cultural diversity. It is a story that, with the right kinds of support, could be told across the US, in distinctively different ways, in the communities being served by the two-year colleges responsible for delivering foundational coursework for those going on to seek bachelor degrees as well as technical training for those entering the workforce for the first time or retraining in response to a changing labor environment.

A key lesson embodied in such stories is the importance of expanding the “relational bandwidth” of communication within the community by realizing conditions in which cultural and cognitive differences can be embraced as the basis of mutual contribution. In the case of Middlesex Community College, this deep diversity arose when the college and the community joined in the common cause of creating a space for practicing traditional Cambodian ceramic arts. As important as exercising individual choices are in leading satisfactory lives, it is in generating shared commitments by working shoulder-to-shoulder together that a community’s creative potential is most surely and sustainably made manifest.

Community colleges are at the leading edge of higher education. This is true not only because they have primary responsibility for ensuring success in the first two years of post-secondary learning, or because it is part of their mandate to be flexibly responsive to local labor needs and employment opportunities. In approaches that are now being emulated around the world, American community colleges have led the way toward realizing truly universal higher education and in turning away from pedagogy focused on transmitting knowledge to pedagogy focused on eliciting learning. But they have also been at the leading edge of a structural shift toward outsourcing teaching responsibilities to part-time adjunct faculty who typically teach part-time at multiple institutions, without benefits, and without either clear incentives or consistent opportunities to offer more to the college and its surrounding community than their classroom expertise. The structural shift has been yielding modest gains in fiscal capital or liquidity at the expense of incalculable forfeitures of human capital that ultimately compromise community strength and creativity.

As an endeavor to support responsive and responsible growth from within at American two-year colleges, the NEH Bridging Cultures initiative has taken a lead in showing how public investment in higher education can result in strengthening community. Perhaps the single most important insight afforded by the ASDP Bridging Cultures project is that the magnitude of this return on investment is proportional to the degree to which community colleges are able to serve as “educational ecotones” or zones of heightened diversity in which differences in culture, cognitive style or values are not ignored or tolerated, but rather appreciated as opportunities for going beyond invocations of an abstract “common” good to involvement in realizing concrete goods and goals in which all community members—from adjuncts to administrators and from students to local businesspeople—each have distinctive, contributory shares. In summarizing the impacts of the ASDP Bridging Cultures project at the final Lessons Learned Conference, Fay

Beauchamp (CCP) stated that, “What NEH has offered us is not just funding for three years of activity; it has offered us recognition and respect, not in spite of being community college faculty, but *as* community college faculty. That has been invaluable.” Or, as Dona Cady (MCC) put it, “Bridging Cultures enabled us to open paths through what we *have* to do that offered us unexpected prospects on what we *could* do.” It has been an honor for all of us involved to contribute to the Bridging Cultures endeavor.